

November Newsletter Extended Article

Getting the most out of student voice

by Joseph Harris, hybrid teacher leader on special assignment

Educators who amplify student voice experience deeper levels of engagement because they make their classrooms a place where all students can count on their feedback and ideas making a difference. By leveraging student voice, teachers foster a classroom atmosphere in which deep conversations about learning occur with students. Teachers promote growth mindsets in students which encourages them to own their learning.

["Motivation, Engagement, and Student Voice,"](#) suggests that "The movement to raise standards may fail if teachers are not supported to understand the connections among motivation, engagement and student voice." While this is true, student voice remains an area of untapped potential for many educators.

Kentucky's Professional Growth and Effectiveness System (PGES) has a built-in student voice component that requires teachers to administer a survey at least one time per school year. But authentically integrating student voice into the classroom is much more than a one-time survey.

A classroom where student voice is authentically integrated is one where teachers frequently use a variety of tools to tap into student voice and choice. Frequent feedback from students through a variety of tools and formats, and ongoing dialogue about what is and isn't working with teaching and learning is a driving force for teachers who leverage student voice.

When teachers begin to think about using student voice in reflective practice and to grow their classrooms into a place where every voice is heard, there are a few principles they must keep in mind:

- **Be ready for honest feedback.**

When we ask students for their honest perception of our practice, we get honest feedback. The first survey I ever administered, before PGES existed, came from the suggestion of a veteran teacher. I was excited to administer the survey because I really expected my students to give me positive feedback.

I was a first-year teacher, and I was working hard every day. When I read through the surveys, I found that most of my students felt like they weren't being challenged. At first, I was hurt. I was internalizing the data. Eventually, I realized this honest feedback was an opportunity for me to grow and I started taking steps to improve.

- **Always bring the data back to the students.**

Administering a survey or another student voice tool can be even more empowering when you share the data with the students. Throw out a few areas of concern and ask your students for suggestions on improvement.

At first, it is incredibly intimidating to share YOUR areas of need with students, but I've found some of my greatest lessons have stemmed from asking students for suggestions. Several students suggested that I incorporate more

music into lessons. Their suggestions gave me the idea to analyze the lyrics of some songs and have an interview with the band through Skype.

- **Consider multiple student voice tools and data points throughout the year.** Don't just rely on one administration of one tool for student perception. Establish a baseline and continue to ask for student feedback throughout the year to measure growth. I establish a baseline by administering a paper/pencil copy of the PGES student voice survey.

Also, I administer other surveys at various times throughout the year. Sometimes I don't compile numbers, but instead I administer a true/false survey and ask students to list suggestions for improvement. I bring those suggestions back to the class and we brainstorm ideas together. Other times, I ask students to tell me by word of mouth or in a quick reflection on a sticky note whether a certain lesson or strategy worked.

At the beginning of every unit, we review our learning targets together and we do a mini-planning session in which students provide suggestions on how they would like to approach the targets in the unit. If something doesn't work, we keep trying until we find what does.

Another tool I use quite often is an interest inventory.

Do you want to learn more? As a teacher leader on special assignment through KDE this year, I spend a half-day teaching English at Lawrence County High School and a half-day working on a special project to benefit Kentucky educators and students. Through action research and collaboration with both teachers and students, I am creating a toolkit for authentically integrating student voice into the classroom. Teachers can become involved in the following ways:

- pilot the free tools and provide feedback
- send tools to be considered for piloting and refinement
- serve on a teacher team to create, distribute and support the use of student voice and choice tools (virtual or face-to-face)

If you would like to learn more about this project, please check out this new virtual space: [Integrating Student Voice](#) or e-mail me at joseph.harris@education.kyschools.us.

Works Cited

Toshalis, Eric, and Michael J. Nakkula. "Motivation, Engagement, And Student Voice." *Education Digest* 78.1 (2012): 29. Oct. 2015